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A KEEN CORPORATE CULTURE

Dwight Cooper of PPR believes it is the cornerstone of success

By Ashley Cisneros

Following the Golden Rule is usually deemed a nice principle for living one's life, but can a company use the rule to become more profitable?

Dwight Cooper, CEO of PPR Healthcare Staffing, would probably tell you "yes." Cooper says that building a positive corporate culture can yield a significant return on investment. The corporate culture at PPR in Jacksonville Beach, Fla., has developed from a foundation based on the Golden Rule in the company's early years, to a robust structure of systems and processes today.

Business texts and human resources consultants offer several definitions of corporate culture, but most agree that corporate culture encompasses the values of a company and guide its business practices. Some references cite corporate culture as the character of an organization, reflected from the vision of the founders.

Whatever the definition, PPR has been doing something right. The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), the largest of all HR organizations with more than 250,000 members, has named PPR one of the "Best Small and Medium Companies to Work for in America" for five consecutive years. Only three other companies share this distinction. SHRM's "best company" designation is derived from independent, confidential employee surveys. Using these surveys, employees offer honest feedback on their workplace experiences.

"We've been in business for more than 13 years, during which time we have outgrown our market in multiples of 10," Cooper says. "Today our market has become commoditized, and we have literally hundreds of competitors. But our ideology has allowed us to outgrow everyone. It speaks to our vision and the execution of our most important mis-

sion—to create a great place to work."

People often assume that PPR has great benefits, compensation, and flexible scheduling. But what really makes it a great place to work is something else. "We do fun stuff, but what we really focus on is building trusting relationships," Cooper says. "You nurture these relationships by being a great communicator and by implementing processes and systems that ensure transparency companywide."

Culture not an accident

PPR's success wasn't an accident. Cooper has been intentional and strategic about the development of PPR's corporate culture. "We manage it every month, every week, and every day," he says. "This has allowed us to attract better people who work better in teams. Because of this diligence, we win."

PPR employees speak with one



PROFILE

another every day, and every employee has complete clarity about their role within the company, Cooper says. "PPR's corporate culture is one in which efficient two-way communication allows us to be dynamic and nimble," he says. "This communication helps us perform better and make better decisions."

Every work week begins with a 20-minute standing meeting held Mondays at 8:31 a.m. Employees receive and share information about metrics, financials, strategies, and tactics. The meeting also presents an opportunity for peer recognition and presentations from local organizations.

Cooper believes that it is difficult to have too much communication if done right.

"Our 8:31 a.m. meetings are attended by about 70 employees. Ten of the 70 may not care about financial statements, and five may already know every detail of those statements. The remaining 55 fall everywhere in between," he says. "In theory, we may be wasting the time of 10 people, but without the meeting process in place, we don't have the opportunity to talk to the rest who actually may be interested. The face-to-face time is essential to business performance."

Cooper says that PPR has a lot of meetings, but they are short, often stand-up meetings, and their purpose is to provide incremental clarity.

"These short meetings save us from junky stuff down the road. Without the short meeting, we risk going in different ways," he says. "I'm a big fan of lots of meetings, making sure they are done in a very efficient and smart way."



Culture one person at a time

Since PPR is a staffing company, it really has two sets of employees—the company employees, plus the healthcare professionals who are placed with PPR's clients.

HOW YOU CAN CORPORATE



Think of your corporate culture as your corporate identity, suggests Richard Hadden, a Jacksonville-based workplace expert and partner in Contented Cows Partners, www.contentedcows.com. He explains that corporate culture—that is, corporate identity—is driven by the assumptions a business' leader has about people. "Assumptions leaders have about their employees drive their behavior, and that behavior drives the culture," he says.

Hadden suggests four steps to build a strong corporate culture:

1. Identify your assumptions about people. How do you view them? Are they assets or liabilities? "Organizations that see people as assets to be capitalized seem to get more from those people than those that view employees as expenses to be minimized," Hadden observes.

He notes that if you realize your assumptions are less than optimal, you can change them and subsequently change the culture of your company.

2. Create a sense of mission in your organization. Once you clarify your assumptions about your employees, it's time to provide a mission. "Mission is not to be confused with a mission statement," he says. "We see mission statements manifested in plaques and logos, yet they do a lot to create a sense of mission. A mission answers the question, 'What are we all about?'"

To find out if everyone in your business is working with the same sense of mission, he suggests asking 10 employees to list the three top priorities of your company. "If you get 30 different priorities, you



CREATE A GREAT CULTURE



probably have a culture that is not highly defined," he explains. "People may be working very hard in a lot of different ways, but nothing comes to a critical mass." But if you get no more than five or six priorities, then you know people are focused on the same mission.

3. **Go for it!** Whatever culture you decide to develop, go for it all the way, he urges. Strong cultures are felt throughout the company, from top to bottom. He cites Chick-Fil-A as an example of a company with a strong culture. "Whether you work in one of their stores or at their corporate office, you see assumptions borne out in behaviors, and the behaviors are consistent."

In cultures with weak or diluted cultures, behaviors are inconsistent, and it difficult to know the organization's identity.

4. **Hire people who fit the culture.** "This does not get in the way of diversity," he explains. "Organizational culture transcends all of the diversity elements, such as race, gender, age, background, and education." Hire people who are comfortable with your culture."

The real test is, 'Does this applicant have the potential to be happy, productive, and successful in our culture? If yes, then there is the potential to perform well. If no, it is not a good fit. The person will constantly struggle against the organizational culture, spending a lot of time trying to fit in and not putting as much into performing,' says Hadden.

Richard Hadden can be contacted at Contented Cows Partners, 904-720-0870.

"In our home office in Jacksonville Beach, we're able to see each other every day. But we also have 300-500 healthcare professionals in 42 states at any given time," Cooper says. "We try very hard to incorporate our healthcare professionals into the systems we use to create a great corporate culture. This means being great communicators, touching them on regular basis, and being very transparent."

Cooper says he has hired 80 people in the last six years without ever running an advertisement.

"If we send information to our 70 employees who then turn around and e-mail it to 15 contacts, we're able to attract the right kind of people simply through referrals," he says.

Cooper says that the most important thing in PPR's selection process is determining if a job candidate has the right values to fit into the company's corporate culture.



"Through our screening process we look at a candidate's experiences to find out whether they are passionate about their work and whether they are good team players," he explains.

Those applicants who make it through this screening process enjoy unique benefits, such as eight hours a year to volunteer in the community. In addition, PPR subsidizes fitness programs to support employees who wish to work toward health goals.

"Three years ago, it was about recruiting folks who may have already had jobs. Now, this has obviously changed," Cooper says. "I've had people tell me it has been their dream to work for PPR."

Cooper says managers must genuinely care about employees in order to be successful. "Everyone has different emotional intelligence. Some people may argue that I care too much," he says. "Some companies may not view building a positive corporate culture as a priority. To me, it's very important."

Great culture yields success

The value of PPR's corporate culture has manifested itself through positive financial returns and national recognition.

"We attract very talented people who are awesome teammates," Cooper explains. "If my best people are better than my competitor's, and if these people work together in an efficient and powerful way, then we win. We benefit financially and intrinsically."

He describes the Best Companies to Work for in America honors as validating. "I already knew that corporate culture led to better results, but having employees confirm this through confidential surveys is a testament to the power of great work experiences."

The awards have led to a new core competency at PPR. Cooper has been asked to offer seminars about the principles of corporate culture. "This has provided us with a unique opportunity to be thought partners with our clients," Cooper says.

Advice for CEOs and executives

Building positive corporate culture takes time, Cooper says. "Implementing corporate culture processes and systems wasn't always readily accepted by management," he says. "But once they saw the positive results, any resistance diminished."

Great corporate culture will not protect a company from the realities of the current market conditions. "No business is immune to

the effects of our economy," Cooper says. "At a time when employees are fearful about job security, it has never been more important to be transparent."

Cooper encourages CEOs to avoid catching employees by surprise. "Share the good, bad and the ugly. At the same time, always lay out path to good circumstances. This communication is vital for keeping people motivated," he says. "If we have to lay off employees, we treat them with respect. We show them that we care. We do the most we can in terms of severance and providing support in helping them find other employment." **A**



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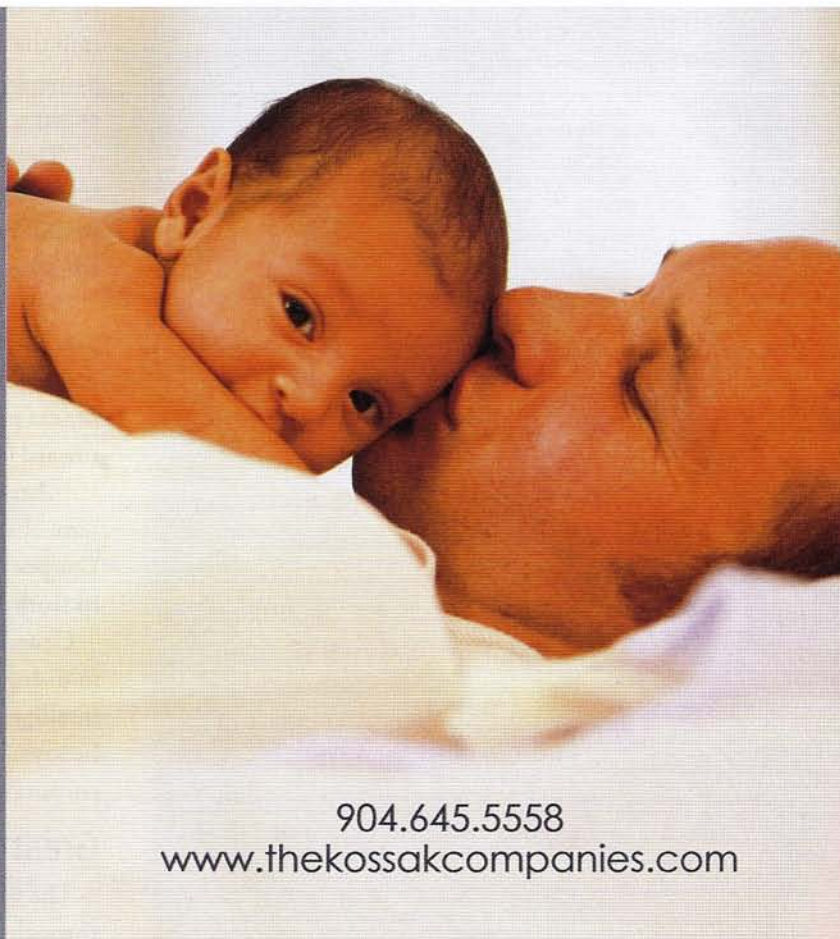
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